The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English

Volume 6 | Issue 1 Article 4

2004

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Keywords
Self-Authentication, Fyodor Dostoevsky, existentialism, Notes from the Underground, The Stranger

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Although Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote a century earlier than the modern existentialist movement and Albert Camus rejected the label of existentialist (Davison 43), many scholars have strongly associated both authors with this philosophy. Even so, the complexity of existentialism makes it difficult to articulate a concrete definition or to categorically place authors within or outside of the movement. Patrick Lyall Bourgeois believes that "it is preferable to follow Paul Ricoeur's insistence in speaking, not of existential*ism*, but of existential*isms* in the plural, indicating a lack of unity of doctrine among various figures usually considered to be existentialists" (29-30). Despite the extensive differences

present in those texts traditionally considered existentialist in nature, Maurice Friedman speaks for many scholars in recognizing their important, albeit general, similarities. Significantly, he includes among their common elements the theme of self-authentication—that "distinction between 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' existence" (4)—which many scholars consider the heart of existential thought. Since Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* and Camus's *The Stranger* are two texts profoundly concerned with authentic existence, it is appropriate to consider the authors as significant contributors to existentialist thought.

In numerous ways the Underground Man and Meursault, the texts' respective main characters, are infinitely complex and often drastically different in their thoughts and actions. Their common concern with the authentic self reveals striking similarities between the two personae. Both characters perceive a disparity between society's definitions of them and their own senses of self. This leads both the Underground Man and Meursault to commit radical acts in hopes of achieving personal wholeness. Unfortunately, instead of creating personal wholeness, these actions

serve to create complex divisions including alienation from other characters, from the reader, and even from the self.

Although both the Underground Man and Meursault have similar goals of authenticating their existence, each defines this objective differently. For the Underground Man, genuine self means one who has rebelled against the deterministic laws of nature to achieve free will. Gary Morson states that "for the underground man, real temporal process—as opposed to an already made product that merely takes time to be revealed—is essential to humanness" (197). The Underground Man refuses the notion that his actions are a result, not of his own desire, but rather of deterministic laws of nature that would reduce him to "nothing more than a kind of piano key or an organ stop" (Dostoevsky 18).

He believes that he can create meaningful existence by acting contrary to the supposed "law" that humans will always desire that which is advantageous to them. Detesting the confines of this determinism, he argues that a man may knowingly desire that which is painful or irrational merely to assert his freedom to

do so. Thus, man may make a choice "in order *to have the right* to desire something even very stupid and not be bound by an obligation to desire only what's smart" (Dostoevsky 21). The subsequent pages of *Notes from Underground* trace his verbal and physical refusal of rational determinism in an attempt to achieve authentic self.

Although conflicted emotions and behavior reveal "that in his heart of hearts the Underground Man does not know whether he is a free agent or not" (Jones 59), he chooses to embrace painful and irrational behavior in a desperate attempt to embody his definition of free will. One of the most striking examples occurs when a group of schoolmates plan a farewell dinner for a friend named Zverkov. The Underground Man asserts his free will by forcing his way into the affair. The Underground Man explains: "I'd go on purpose. The more tactless, the more indecent it was for me to go, the more certain I'd be to do it" (46). At the party he deeply offends his friends and suffers mental anguish in being excluded from the group. He knows he will not be able to forget

the incident, but he refuses to leave. The Underground Man reveals his tormented state when he says,

> (T)hese [are the] filthiest, most absurd, and horrendous moments of my entire life. It was impossible to humiliate myself more shamelessly or more *willingly.* (55, emphasis added)

Though the Underground Man seems partly motivated by spite towards his friends, this passage also reveals a clear desire for irrational, humiliating behavior: an obvious assertion of his free will.

Meursault also asserts a clear desire for authentic existence, but he does not argue for this identity as overtly as does the Underground Man. Therefore, his quest may be interpreted as a less intense struggle than that of the Underground Man, who attempts to prove authenticity while questioning his success in this endeavor. Both characters define authenticity differently. The Underground Man embodies the authentic self not by railing against determinism but rather against the social expectations for his behavior. He does not have

the emotional responses society expects or desires from him. In almost every situation, he responds in a way that others would define as inappropriate. He does not cry at his mother's funeral (Camus 91); he shows no grief after the ceremony, pursuing pleasurable and sensual activities the very next day (19-20); he is not disturbed when he hears his neighbor beating his mistress (36); he shows no remorse after killing an Arab (100).

Meursault's trial evolves into an examination of his moral sensibilities, revealing their inappropriateness according to social standards. When Meursault's lawyer hears the investigators' accusations that his client has "shown insensitivity" the day of his mother's funeral (Camus 64), he tries to make the case that Meursault was unable to express his emotions. Meursault, however, refuses to admit to emotions he never felt: "He [my lawyer] asked me if he could say that that day I had held back my natural feelings. I said, 'No, because it's not true'" (Camus 65). Refusing to defend those feelings which society demands of him, Meursault affirms his authentic self. He will not betray his true self to impress those observing him and requiring that he fit their social

mold. "Meursault refuses to make an abstraction of himself" by "becom[ing] a great performer of feelings" (Elbrecht 65).

Both the Underground Man's and Meursault's quests for self-authentication by rejecting society's confines ultimately alienate them from others. Maurice Friedman alludes to Kierkegaard's distinction between "the single one" and "the crowd" (10) in identifying typical characteristics of existentialist characters as including "personal authentication of existence, and with it, when necessary that aloneness that enables one to stand as a genuine person, or 'Single One,' in the face of the crowd" (10). Both Meursault and the Underground Man experience this aloneness—this distance from society—as a consequence of pursuing self-authentication.

The titles of the two works alert the reader to the prominence of this type of alienation in the characters' experiences. Camus entitled his novel *L'Etranger*, a very difficult term to translate accurately into English. Showalter refers to the definition of "étranger" in the established French dictionary, the *Petit Robert*: "Person whose nationality is not that

of a given country; person who does not belong, or is considered not to belong to a family or clan; person with whom one has nothing in common" (22)—noting that the last two meanings are particularly applicable to Camus's character. True to its title, *The Stranger* traces Meursault's experience as one who does not belong in society and is therefore alienated and rejected.

Scholars disagree somewhat as to why Meursault is fundamentally a stranger to the rest of society; however, they all note his non-conformity to societal standards. In his extended essay, "An Explication of *The Stranger*," Jean-Paul Sartre says that Meursault is "one of those terrible innocents who shock society by not accepting the rules of its game" (qtd. in Showalter 11). Albert Maquet's argument also sees society as a game governed by rules that we all must follow. He interprets Meursault's alienation as stemming from his refusal to support society's constructs.

> Society condemns . . . this kind of monster who refuses with unequaled firmness to enter into the game of their illusions, lies, and hypocrisies. Society wants a reassuring attitude from him and he

> does nothing but denounce, by his tranquil stubbornness in speaking the truth, the real and miserable aspect of man's fate. (55)

Meursault also appears a stranger to his society because he lives only in the immediate moment; past and future have no meaing for him. Living in successive, unrelated moments rather than in fluid time, he is completely indifferent to life because the past and the present do not affect his value judgments (Maquet 54). For this reason, he can flatly say after the weekend of his mother's funeral, "It occurred to me that anyway one more Sunday was over, that Maman was buried now, that I was going back to work, and that, really, nothing had changed" (Camus 24). This confinement to the present makes the concept of a future with someone meaningless. He tells his girlfriend Marie that love "didn't mean anything" (35) and that "it didn't really matter" whether or not they got married (42). In his book *Albert Camus: A Study*, Brian Masters notes that life for Meursault " is a succession of unrelated events. . .losing all value when they are over" (23). He continues to develop this idea as follows:

> This confinement to the present tense makes him "a 'stranger' among his fellows, with their pasts and their futures, their regrets and their aspirations. Being so unlike them, so 'bizarre' as Marie puts it, he is exiled and alone." (Masters 23)

The title *Notes from Underground* also suggests a theme of alienation between the individual and society. Only a "stranger" to the aboveground world would feel a need to withdraw to the solitary "underground." LikeMeursault, the Underground Man does not fit into society. He clearly recognizes his inability to integrate:

> At that time I was only twenty-four. Even then my life was gloomy, disordered, and solitary to the point of savagery. I didn't associate with anyone; I even avoided talking, and I retreated further and further into my corner.
>
> (Dostoevsky 30)

He later explains his realization that "no one was like me, and I wasn't like anyone else. 'I'm alone,' I mused, 'and they are

everyone'; and I sank into deep thought" (31). He has fleeting moments when he desires connection with others, as when he desires reconciliation with the friends he has offended (55); however, his insistence on irrational behavior effectively bars him from all hope of a healthy relationship.

His alienation is most evident in his rejection of love with Liza. When he first meets her, he appears to have a normal emotional response; he admires her physical appearance and her "simple and kind" face (60). However, his thoughts quickly become disturbing. Recognizing his disheveled appearance and "pale, spiteful, and mean" face, he thinks to himself, "'It doesn't matter. I'm glad' [...] 'In fact, I'm even delighted that I'll seem so repulsive to her; that pleases me...'" (60-1). He may have flickering moments when he desires normal relationships, but ultimately he "wanted to remain alone in my underground" (88).

He has deliberately chosen to defy the laws of nature that guide everyone else's actions, thus isolating himself from the aboveground world. In attempting self-authentication through irrational, disturbing behavior, he has distanced himself from others.

Like Meursault, the Underground Man works toward self-authentication by affirming his free will to choose irrationality; and his radical rejection of a determined life alienates him from the rest of the world, which operates under the supposed laws of nature. The significant element for both characters is their experience as Kierkegaard's "single one," alienated from "the crowd" in their process of creating a meaningful personal existence.

Although Meursault and the Underground Man appear to desire a connection with the reader, both characters ultimately distance themselves from their respective audiences. The most obvious basis for reader / character alienation in *The Stranger* is an inability to relate to Meursault. The reader, like the textual "others," cannot understand a character removed from emotion and confined exclusively to the present. As Albert Maquet argues, "Insensibility, indifference, absence of feelings, 'inhumanity,' this comprises more than is needed to elicit our avowal that Meursault has appeared to us [readers] as a 'stranger'" (54). The Underground Man may also be interpreted as a "stranger" because the reader has difficulty in relating to his aggressiveness,

intense turmoil, and anti-social behavior. As Malcom Jones states, "The Underground Man is certainly very unattractive, and no sane reader would choose the Underground as he does..." (61).

Initially, the first-person narrative appears to be most fitting for honesty and openness with the reader, since it allows the character to assume the role of narrator and directly share his point of view. However, this possibility is negated by the unreliability of the narrators. John Cruickshank expounds upon this significant characteristic of the text:

> Traditionally, the first-person narrator in fiction has possessed *a high degree of self-knowledge* and has enjoyed a *privileged insight* (emphasis added) into the thoughts and motives of his fellow characters... Immediately [when] one begins to read *L'Etranger*, however, one is struck by the fact that the narrator, who is also the main character, appears peculiarly ill-equipped, by traditional standards, for his task. His intellectual powers are unimpressive, his psychological insight

> is almost non-existent, and in general he appears bemused by experience. (152)

The narrator leaves the reader ignorant not only of insights about others but also about himself, because he lacks the "self-knowledge" of typical first-person narrators. Showalter notes the particular difficulty of interpreting Meursault in relation to the legal process because of his inadequacy as narrator: "Meursault provides a highly unreliable account of his trial—admits his attention wavers, that his memory is selective, that his own concerns differ from those of the court" (48). Not only does this warp the reader's perception of what actually occurred but notably, "The distortions [of his narration] do not reveal a pattern with which we can explain Meursault" (Showalter 48). Despite an apparent effort to make himself known, Meursault does not reliably communicate, rendering us incapable of understanding his authentic self.

This distancing reflects an authorial decision in character and text development. Patrick McCarthy compares Camus's literary objectives in both *The Stranger* and *Caligula* as follows: "In both cases his aim was to disturb the reader-spectator and to

prevent him from identifying with a hero or entering a story" (80). Camus has successfully accomplished this aim, alienating us from the main character. The reader cannot relate to a character removed from emotion and he cannot objectively enter the text because of the unreliable narration.

The Underground Man's similarly unreliable narration also disturbs the reader and prevents him from identifying with the Underground Man or understanding his authentic self. He alerts us to his inadequacy as a communicator and his inability to understand reality from the opening of the novel: "I am a sick man... I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I think my liver is diseased. Then again, I don't know a thing about my illness; I'm not even sure what hurts" (Dostoevsky 3). His ambivalence about his own concrete experience makes the reader uncertain of the reliability of his perceptions of himself and others.

As the story advances, the Underground Man serves not only as an unreliable narrator but also as an openly hostile one. Mikhail Bakhtin reads *Notes from Underground* as a text profoundly influenced by the language of other people and

interprets the main character's hostility as a fear-induced response to that language. The main character's primary objective is to attain freedom from the opinions and judgments of others (who may be interpreted as the readers), so he does not want to acknowledge their importance to his objective. Bakhtin explains this objective as follows:

> What he fears most of all is that people might think he is repenting before someone, that he is asking someone's forgiveness, that he is reconciling himself to someone else's judgment or evaluation, that his self-affirmation is somehow in need of affirmation and recognition by another. (154)

This desire and disdain creates a complex relationship between the Underground Man and his reader. Bakhtin recognizes that "in its attitude toward the other person it [the Underground Man's discourse] strives to be deliberately inelegant, to 'spite' him and his tastes in all respects" (156). His desire to be absolutely independent of the other's consciousness and its discourse means

an "extreme hostility toward it and nonacceptance of its judgments" (Bakhtin 155). Andrew Swensen also notes the antagonistic relationship set up between the Underground Man and his reader. "Dostoevsky's protagonist regularly addresses a 'you' within the text, a series of taunts marks this 'you' as an adversary" (270). Despite their use of first-person narrative, which could lend itself to open and enlightening disclosure to the reader. Both writers put the reader at a distance through their unreliable narrators.

Although these attempts at self-authentication distance the characters from others and the reader, their most tragic consequence is an ultimate alienation from their authentic selves. The Underground Man believes his hyperconsciousness allows him to reject determinism and define his own existence, yet this very mental state also serves as his downfall. In distancing himself from all objectifications including his own, he becomes both himself and the other, a division incompatible with a truly authentic self. Joseph Beatty asserts:

> Self-consciousness, then, is his [the Underground Man's] glory and misery. It is his glory because

> its transcendence of all determinations frees him from diminishment and reduction. Because he is always other, he is evermore ahead of any and all of his own or others' objectifications. Self-consciousness is also his misery, for he can neither be nor be recognized for what he is... *The tragedy of the UM [Underground Man] seems to be that he cannot know or be himself* (emphasis added) nor be known or be loved by others. (198)

A similar argument for self-division rather than reconciliation may be made for the main character of *The Stranger* although Meursault's self-alienation may be interpreted as resulting from an underdeveloped consciousness as distinguished from the Underground Man's hyperconsciousness. When asked during his trial whether he felt any sadness at his mother's funeral, Meursault articulates his self-approach: "I answered that I had pretty much lost the habit of analyzing myself and that it was hard for me to tell him what he wanted to know" (Camus 65). If one concedes that

Meursault has emotions (regardless of whether they conform to society's standards), then his unwillingness to examine his feelings actually renders him incapable of recognizing his true self. English Showalter, Jr. analyzes Meursault's reluctance for self-examination in relation to the killing of the Arab as follows:

> His [Meursault's] refusal of introspection allows him to confuse his conditioned reflexes with instincts. His rejection of purposes and meanings makes him blind to his own motives. He genuinely does not know why he killed the Arab, . . . [nor] why he did anything else. . . . Every attempt to make him examine his own motives he brushes aside [. . .] if he cannot withdraw physically, he withdraws mentally. (44)

Interpreted in this manner, Meursault's effort at self-authentication lacks introspection. He does not know his deepest self because he is blinded by his personal philosophy.

Thus, Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* and Camus's *The Stranger* trace their main characters'

existential pursuit of self-authentication by their refusal of traditional social confines. Both texts insightfully explore the relational consequences of this process; the Underground Man and Meursault want to embrace their authentic selves, yet pursuing this objective leads to absolute alienation as they are distanced from society, the reader, and themselves. By effectively criticizing self-authentication, Dostoevsky and Camus have made significant contributions to the existential discourse that has deepened people's understanding of the pursuit of one's true self.

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